

HOW DO WE TRACK OUR PROGRESS?

- Tracking Systems
- Monitoring Performance Measures

TRACKING SYSTEMS

Tracking systems: monitor progress, compile management information and keep the plan on track.

Tracking the implementation of objectives and goals will normally be the responsibility of the individual or team responsible for completion of the action plan. Ideally, monitoring should follow a regular schedule--quarterly or monthly.

Developing a tracking document

Elements for a workable tracking document should include:

- Goals.
- Objectives.
- Performance measures.
- Action plans, including the identification of the position, unit, section and/or division responsible for implementation.
- Room for comments and an explanation of the actions taken to date.
- Information on current status.

Remember that by adding space for comments and the current status of each action step, your action plan may work for your tracking document.



Key Point

The tracking document is only as useful as the information it contains and provides to management. Remember that this report will be a tool that management will use not only to evaluate the goals and objectives, but also to react quickly and effectively to the unexpected.

Progress and non-progress should be reported. Report progress to date on steps in the action plan that are completed ahead of schedule and that are on schedule. If things are not progressing according to plan, report the reasons, as well as what is being done to get implementation back on track.

Agencies will develop their own methods of tracking implementation of their goals, objectives and action plans. The document needs to track the status of each action step. For example, is it on schedule, delayed, canceled, ahead of schedule, or in the planning stages? Use of short, easy-to-recognize codes (e.g. "OS" for On Schedule) will facilitate use of the report. Ample space should be included for comments. Program managers should be encouraged to include as much or as little comment as is necessary to give complete information to upper management.

MONITORING PERFORMANCE MEASURES

In addition to tracking progress on goals, objectives and action plans, performance measures should also be monitored. Data should be collected for each performance measure and reported at a regular interval. Progress reports on performance measures could be in the form of data tables or presented in charts or graphs.



Note

When using performance measures as indicators of progress, it is important to note that most outcome measures only provide a "score" indicating how well the characteristic being measured is doing. External factors will affect the value of most, if not all, outcome measures.

Comparison of actual performance, as reported in the monitoring document, to the "planned" performance (i.e., target) provides the basis for periodic evaluation of the strategic plan and the planning process. Management should use the results of the quarterly or monthly reports to identify reasons for not meeting expected results and use this information to review and revise policies, procedures, goals and objectives, as necessary.

Tracking performance and reporting results is an important way to measure progress toward meeting the goals in the strategic plan. Assist staff by articulating some boundaries.

- Designate specific cut-off times for reporting.
- Pay special attention to continuity of data collection and calculation during personnel changes. Train the new staff on how to calculate the measures in accordance with previous methods.
- Be sure there are effective internal controls to be sure the information is properly collected and accurately reported. It is difficult and embarrassing to take back information once it leaves your office.

For each performance measure, compare actual performance with the proposed performance level, and report the results. Ask the following questions about variances:

- How does the reported performance compare to previous periods?
- Is the variance relevant to successful achievement of the goal?
- Do external factors affect performance to the extent that targets may not be met?
- Is the variance due to a faulty project of performance?
- Are there unanticipated effects resulting from the variance?
- How frequently and in what form will the performance information be prepared?

- What kinds of explanatory data do you think will be needed to explain trends and results?
- How will the data/information be verified and checked for accuracy? What kinds of controls, tests and/or audits are appropriate?
- What kinds of unintended results can you expect from implementing the strategies? How can you avoid these results?
- How will you use the data to evaluate, improve, and change your programs?
- How will you know if your program is inefficient or ineffective? What will you do to fix it?

Reporting the Results

Each agency will establish its own guidelines concerning how often performance information is to be collected and reported. At a minimum, data for each measure will have to be collected annually, but some measures may be calculated more frequently.

For example, you may want to have internal management reports on key volume/caseload indicators every month and aggregate and report this information to upper management on a quarterly or semi-annual basis. For other indicators (especially if the month-to-month changes are nominal), you may want your data-reporting period to be semi-annually.

External reporting. External stakeholders, policy makers, providers, contractors, etc., want to know how well the organization and its programs are performing. If performance measurements show a continuous improvement process with a positive impact on results, some of the stakeholders' concerns may be allayed.

Reports for policy makers should be clear and concise. Reports are often easier to read if the data are presented graphically. Reporting performance measures can also be aggregated and incorporated in annual reports.

Use explanatory information when reporting results. You can rarely measure all the variables or identify true cause-and-effect relationships. To do so would require a rigorous experimental design, which would be impossible or prohibitively expensive. Multiple factors can influence outcomes and many are beyond the control of the program manager. Recognize that your measures have some limitations, and try to explain any unexpected results.

The following may help in the communication of results.

- Include targets as well as actual results.
- Include explanations where performance varies significantly from previous levels or targets.
- Develop reports that are user-friendly and that citizens and other stakeholders will be able to understand.

- Will the information enable readers to assess the level of performance?
- How aggregated or desegregated should the reported information be?
- Is too much information being communicated?
- How will feedback on the reported information be gathered?

Internal reporting. Internal reports can take various forms. Chief among these are program performance evaluation, planning and budgeting activities, and implementation of improvement activities. These reports for program managers can be more detailed and are usually more frequent than those for policy makers. They may also include more process information. Sometimes the data may be separated in order to clearly convey patterns. For example, results may be more meaningful if reported by geographic area.



What if data shows poor performance?

Let the measures speak for themselves. Show people how they are doing. Ask for and offer explanations. Agencies don't always have control over ultimate results; the economy or events in people's lives can influence a program's outcome. Determine what can be done differently.

It's okay to constructively confront substandard performance. If not, poor performance is sanctioned and opportunities to improve are limited. Keep in mind that measuring performance also recognizes accomplishments.

Now that all of the elements of the strategic plan are in place, what mechanism will be used to monitor the implementation of goals and objectives? Without tracking, responsibility and accountability are lost and the strategic plan is just a document.

Example of a Tracking Document for the Arizona Department of Revenue

GOAL 2: To ensure conscientious collection, safekeeping and disposal of unclaimed property.

I.D. #'s	OBJECTIVES/ACTION STEPS	STATUS	COMMENTS	DIVISIONS
94-2-5	Ensure the best level of service to owners of unclaimed property by increasing refunds from 19.5% in FY 1994 to 21.5% by FY 1995			
94-2-5-1	As part of a trial program, identify 50 businesses that are holders of unclaimed property and encourage them to submit reports via electronic media to reduce keying of data by staff and free up section resources.	OS	Received over 3,000 accounts from holders using AZARS. This has saved over 80 hours of manual input by temporaries and special entry of accounts. Have entered over 26,200 accounts for advertising while handling 87% increase in phone calls from last year. Walk-ins increased by 229, or 104%, compared to the same period last fiscal year. 4,000 more claims have been processed this fiscal year to date over the same period last fiscal year. This represents a 248% increase.	Administrative Services
94-2-5-2	Monitor progress of trial program to ensure that freed-up resources are used to increase to 21.5% the gross unclaimed property revenues refunded during the fiscal year.	OS		Administrative Services

STATUS CODES: OS: On Schedule AOS: Ahead of Schedule DL: Delayed CA: Canceled PS: In the Planning Stages